

Gender, Women Participation and Representation in Local Governance: The Case of Chivi Communal Areas in Masvingo

Maxwell C.C. Musingafi^{1*} Kwaedza E. Kaseke² Lilian Chaminuka³
1.Zimbabwe Open University, Development Studies, Masvingo Regional Campus
2.Zimbabwe Open University, Department of Development Studies, Harare
3.Zimbabwe Open University, Department of Counselling, Harare
* E-mail of the corresponding author: mmusingafi@gmail.com

Abstract

This study sought to assess gender, women participation and representation in local governance in Chivi communal areas. This study sought to discover the factors that condition the effectiveness of decentralisation policies and strategies in empowering women to actively participate in local governance. Qualitative research was chosen to guide this investigation as the approach would give room for an opportunity to gain insight into the phenomenological perspectives and unique experiences of rural women in Chivi communal areas with regard to their political participation and representation in local governance. The study made use of questionnaires, interviews, qualitative document analysis and observations to gather data relevant to the understanding of the topic under investigation. The study established that decentralisation policies and strategies had made insignificant contribution to involving women in the political processes of their communities. Patriarchy was found to be the biggest socio-cultural factor impeding the successful implementation of decentralisation policies and strategies. It was also established that lack of political will and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms on the part of policy-makers translated to policies and strategies being formulated but hardly implemented. The study recommends that gender sensitisation be used as a weapon against patriarchy. Policy makers are encouraged to ensure that policies are implemented and that they achieve their objectives.

Keywords: gender, women, decentralisation, participation, representation, local governance, communal areas, Chivi, Masvingo

1. Introduction

Women have traditionally occupied subservient positions in relation to men in the social, economic and political spheres of life. Women in rural Zimbabwe, like many others in the world, still live under socio-political systems that consign them to positions in which they have to live as appendages of men. Of course, there are concerted efforts being made to end this male dominance and incorporate women into the decision-making and governance processes in their communities, but still these efforts seem not to bring forth the desired results. This study investigates the contribution of local governance and decentralisation policies in ensuring that women are also actively represented in these decision-making fora. The central focus of the study is how far decentralisation has contributed to the political participation of rural women in Chivi communal areas and how much political representation women have gained in local governance as a result of that participation.

2. Statement of the Problem

In spite of the concerted efforts that have been made to empower women, women's level of political participation and representation in institutions of governance remain very low. At independence, the Zimbabwean governance system pledged its commitment to local governance and decentralisation. How much do local governance systems open the doors to the corridors of political power for women?

3. Research Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to establish the influence of local governance and decentralisation policies on rural women's participation and representation in the local government of Chivi Rural District Council. This study seeks to:

- assess the socio-cultural factors affecting the political participation of rural women in local government in Chivi Rural District Council; and
- find out what can be done to enhance the political participation and representation of rural women in local government.

4. Previous Studies and Past Experiences

Dziva et al's (2013) study of rural women's participation in primary elections in Mberengwa revealed that rural women often have to grapple with a hostile political environment that does not promote their rise in politics. The study, however, is silent on the role and place of women in local governance. The study simply sought to investigate the challenges faced by women vying for posts in political structures without paying attention to the

policy of decentralisation and its ability to aid women in realising the goal of political empowerment.

4.1 Women and elections

In Zimbabwe, women constitute 52% of the population. This, according to the Research and Advocacy Unit (2012), means that there are about a quarter of a million more women voters than men, given the estimated 12.6 million total of the population, and assuming that half of the population is under the age of eighteen and thus cannot vote. Yet this numerical superiority of women voters is not matched by women's representation in formal structures of governance, including rural district councils. "In local government terms, women form over 65% of the primary users of local authority services. This means that the first and main users of the service are women...Unfortunately, the number of women in positions of influence does not reflect the population statistics" (Councillors' Induction Handbook, 2013:53). This under-representation of women in political structures may be an indication of low levels of women's participation in electoral politics.

The few women that have made it to political office have had limited influence as compared to their male counterparts (Goetz, 2002, cited in MacLean, 2003). This is a result of the politics of patronage that characterise most African countries. Only those women favoured by the powerful male elites rise to political office. While acknowledging the positive contributions that women political office bearers have made, especially in the constitution-making process, Ndlovu and Mutale (2013:76) observe that "in most African countries women in the reserved political seats as a result of the quota systems have been like chess pieces, as they have been moved by men." In order to make it in the stiff competition for political office, women have to build strategic coalitions with men, working out compromises that they would otherwise not make if they had enough support from fellow women within their parties (Gaidzanwa, 2004). Both observations by these researchers point to the reality of women who ride on the back of men in order to survive in politics and therefore, have to live at these men's beck and call.

One can, therefore, conclude from the existing body of research on women's political participation in local government that, notwithstanding the multitude of efforts that have so far been made to empower women politically at local government level, women have not gained effective participation in politics.

4.2 The constitutional-legal framework of decentralisation

Historically, the constitutional and legal framework in Zimbabwe has not been particularly promotive of an egalitarian policy of decentralisation that sought to politically empower the marginalised sections of the populace, let alone the rural woman. According to the Zimbabwe Institute (2005), the local government system in Zimbabwe is a legislative rather than a constitutional creature, which, in reality, means that "local government is not an independent sphere of government, but an appendage of central government." Gaidzanwa (2004) observes that neither the constitution of Zimbabwe nor the Electoral Act provides for a quota in favour of women as electoral candidates. This, in effect, means that the government of Zimbabwe has not been committed to empowering women, and the pronouncements it makes about women empowerment are just political gimmicks.

However, the current national constitution seems to have taken a turn in the right direction. According to the national objectives in Chapter 17 of the Zimbabwean Constitution titled Gender Balance on 17b(i), "the state must take all measures, including legislative measures needed to ensure that both genders are equally represented in all institutions and agencies of government at every level and (ii) women constitute at least half the membership of all Commissions and other elective and appointed governmental bodies established by or under this constitution or any act of parliament" (Harare Residents Trust, 2013:2). So, if the current constitution recognises the imperative of women empowerment by placing them in decision-making positions "at every level", one can safely conclude that the constitutional-legal framework now provides an enabling environment for the thriving of decentralised governance and, hopefully, the effective political participation of rural women. However, the reality on the ground testifies to a different state of affairs; women continue to be politically marginalised. Does the problem lie with the formulation and implementation of the policy of decentralisation or there are other factors that militate against an otherwise well-formulated and correctly implemented policy?

With the institution of the office of the District Administrator (DA), to replace that of the colonial District Commissioner, the local people were reduced to mere spectators in the developmental processes of their own communities as the DA effectively became the chief advisor to council, chief implementer, government regulator and monitor. Rural people have generally felt powerless as they have had little input in decisions affecting their lives (Zimbabwe Institute, 2005). This means that the policy of decentralisation, as regards the rural setting, has not served its purpose, but has been a sort of decentralised dictatorship meant to make the rural populace more pliable. As Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, Ignatius Chombo has explained in the past: "local councils enjoy delegated authority and thus should follow government, and by extension, ZANU PF policies." (*The Daily Mirror*, 30.08.04, cited in the Zimbabwe Institute, 2005:5).

It therefore goes without saying that the formulation and implementation of the policy of

decentralisation is fundamentally flawed and purposely designed, not to empower rural women, but to consolidate the power of the ruling, and predominantly male, elite. Manor (1999), cited in MacLean (2003), argues that decentralisation reforms have been implemented as an attempt to gain local support for national political parties or movements, cultivate local allies, extend authoritarian political controls into remote regions of a nation, satisfy the requirements of international donors and lenders, or diffuses pressures for national democratization. Little wonder then why women in general and rural women in particular continue to play second fiddle in local political processes: their empowerment has never been a priority in the formulation of decentralisation policies!

Also, some analysts have criticised policy-makers for putting the cart before the horse with regard to using the policy of decentralisation to enhance women's political participation at local level. The decentralisation of responsibilities, power and resources has almost invariably preceded the building of capacities of local governments, local civil society and most importantly local rural women to participate in local political processes (Goetz 2002, cited in MacLean 2003). So, in the absence of these factors that condition the effectiveness of women's political participation, the policy of decentralisation can hardly be expected to achieve its intended goal.

4.3 Women's political participation in the socio-cultural context

According to Gaidzanwa (2004:2), "inequalities between men and women tend to be historically constructed and maintained through institutions such as the family, the economy, the polity and society as a whole." She goes further to observe that "while women can do well in the general society in Zimbabwe, in politics, the structures and processes tend to be especially exclusionary, favouring men over women and creating barriers that women have to surmount in order to participate." This observation is supported by Tichagwa (undated), cited in Gaidzanwa (2004: 21) who posits that the, "main factor limiting women's participation in politics is the gender composition of leaders in the political parties and the procedures for selection of candidates to run for parliamentary elections. Political parties are in general dominated by men who select candidates or influence the selection at the constituency and provincial levels. Women have little or no influence over the selection of candidates." This means that the policy of decentralisation, since it cannot dictate what happens within political parties, cannot challenge the structural inequalities therein and women continue to be politically dominated by men.

Socially, women who dare enter the political field are more easily stigmatised than their male counterparts. The prospect of such stigmatisation often prevents women from competing for political positions in their local constituencies, leaving only men to contest political dominance of those constituencies. Gaidzanwa (2004) observes that personal information about women who aspire for political office is used to erect and consolidate discriminatory barriers, making it difficult for women who are divorced, widowed, single or elderly to stand for office. Such women are usually attacked for not being docile, attractive, young or pliable. This creates more room for men to participate in an arena where their marital status, age, looks or personal conducts are of little consequence (ibid). What is considered inconsequential and irrelevant in a male political aspirant is considered essential and indispensable in his female counterpart. Ultimately, such differential treatment of men and women frightens women out of the public domain, resulting in women's limited political participation and under-representation in political office (ibid).

The majority of rural women have had formal education only up to Ordinary Level and, therefore, lack the advantages that come with high levels of formal education. Schlozman and Verba (2001:286), cited in Ndlovu and Mutale (2013:75) assert that education is a 'powerful predictor of political participation'. This assertion is supported by Ndlovu and Mutale (2013:75) who note that an "improvement in women's education in most African countries has led to the emergence of a larger group of proficient women who are in a position to compete with men for political power in various levels."

Gaidzanwa (2004) notes that there are gross economic inequalities in Zimbabwe, a factor which makes only those with economic muscle of note stand a chance of succeeding in electoral politics. There is consensus among researchers that generally, women are less economically privileged than men, which implies that women are less likely to succeed in electoral politics than men. Political positions are a keenly contested domain in any community, a reality which in Zimbabwe is compounded by the First Past The Post (FPTP) electoral system which has made electoral politics a confrontational and do-or-die affair which only the economically powerful and those who can deploy the most violent techniques against their opponents can win (Gaidzanwa 2004). Compared with men, women have neither the economic means nor the brutishness that is so indispensable for one to make it in politics.

Some researchers have asserted that women, besides facing socio-economic and political barriers to their political participation, also contribute to their own disempowerment by displaying a negative attitude towards matters outside the home. "Most women in Zimbabwe are not preoccupied with the overarching male oriented perception of power as success but rather a collective sense of well-being as success. Hence the

availability of food on the table, access to healthcare, the availability of safe sanitary wear, the cleanliness of the environment where they bring up their children and other socio-economic guarantees matter more to women than the number of women in parliament” (Research and Advocacy Unit, 2012). In other words, women are more concerned about satisfying their practical gender needs than meeting their strategic gender needs. Perhaps this explains why women as a political constituency tend to give support to male candidates more than to female candidates (Tichagwa, undated, cited in Gaidzanwa, 2004): They were socialised in such a way as to make them view themselves as home-makers rather than decision-makers. This is supported by Carmel (2002:14) who contends that the “idea that men should be in control runs throughout our social fabric, and women are finding it difficult to break out of the stereotyped roles assigned to them.”

5. Research methodology, participants and instruments

This study uses the qualitative research design. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (Hancock et al 2009). Considering that the central focus of the research process is to gain a deep understanding of how decentralised governance influenced the political participation and representation of rural women as a disaggregated sub-group of the population, qualitative research presents a host of advantages that would otherwise be difficult to realise with other research designs.

This study was conducted in Ward 9, 13 and 14 of Chivi district. The women participants in this study were disaggregated into five groups with distinct socio-economic and political characteristics (namely, women who have had tertiary education, women who have run for political office, women who occupy political positions at the RDC, housewives and women in the opposition MDC). Participants were identified with the assistance of councillors in the three wards. After gaining access and developing trust with the participants, data was collected using interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. These data-gathering tools were complemented by observation and qualitative document analysis.

6. Findings

6.1 Demographic data

The participants in this study were all women purposefully chosen on the basis that they had reached the legal age of majority. Though they all shared the common quality of womanhood, and they were all legally recognised as adults, they differed in terms of age group, educational level and marital status.

One’s age tends to determine one’s economic and social activities which in turn have an influence on one’s political attitude, orientation and inclination (or lack of it). This investigation revealed that young women who are below the age of forty have very little inclination to participate in political activities in their wards and that they are hardly present in the political structures of their political parties and other institutions of governance.

Marital status also predisposes women differently towards participation in public affairs. If, as Gaidzanwa (2004) observes, patriarchy asserts itself through institutions such as the family and the society, then it follows that those women who are not attached to men in matrimony have less patriarchal restrictions than those who are in matrimonial relationships. On the other hand, if society has a less favourable view of single women than those who are married, then it also follows that single women may suffer more public condemnation and ridicule than those that are married. All this has a bearing on women’s political participation and representation in local government.

Equally important was the level of education of women who participated in this research. It was discovered that those who did not have tertiary education wished they had it as they felt that having it would increase their political chances. On the other hand, those who had tertiary education demonstrated disinclination towards political affairs.

6.2 Women in local government

Like every other rural district council elsewhere in Zimbabwe, Chivi is composed of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who controls all the council workers. The CEO works hand in hand with the 32 elected councillors who each represents a ward in Chivi district, the District Administrator (DA) and many other government departments. The 32 councillors are organised into six council committees, namely, finance, human resources, community services, roads planning and works, natural resources, and audit. Each of the council committees is headed by a chairperson who is elected by the councillors. The CEO is also connected to heads of departments that are administration, finance, housing, production, social services as well as engineering and physical planning.

Both main political parties in Zimbabwe (ZANU PF and MDC) have a separate wing for women, the Women’s League and the National Assembly of Women respectively. Most women who are engaged in active politics in Wards 9, 13 and 14 do so through their membership, and/or presence in the bureaucratic structures of these women’s assemblies. It should also be noted that women are conspicuously absent in the bureaucratic structures of the main wings and the youth wings of both ZANU PF and the MDC, membership of which is

open to people of both sexes.

It is thus concluded that the women’s wings of the MDC and ZANU PF are a way of straight-jacketing women’s political clout and decision-making capacity so that influential politics remains the preserve of men. As Kwangwari (2009: 47) argues, the women’s league is a form of femocracy “running parallel to the patriarchal oligarchy upon which it relies for its authority and which it supports.” This brings out another dimension: women participate in local government politics largely under male patronage. Decentralised governance has, therefore, failed to ensure women’s effective political participation in electoral politics.

Table 1: Women’s political obscurity at Chivi Rural District Council

(Source: primary data)

Committee	Number of members	Committee chairperson
Finance	6	male
Human resources	7	male
Audit	5	female
Natural resources	7	male
Community services	7	male
Planning and works	8	male

Table 1 and Fig 1 show the membership and leadership of the council committees. Presiding over all the six council committees is the Chair of Council who, currently, is male. Going back into the history of the council since 1980, no woman has ever led the council as Chair of Council. Neither has any woman served Chivi Rural District Council as Chief Executive Officer.

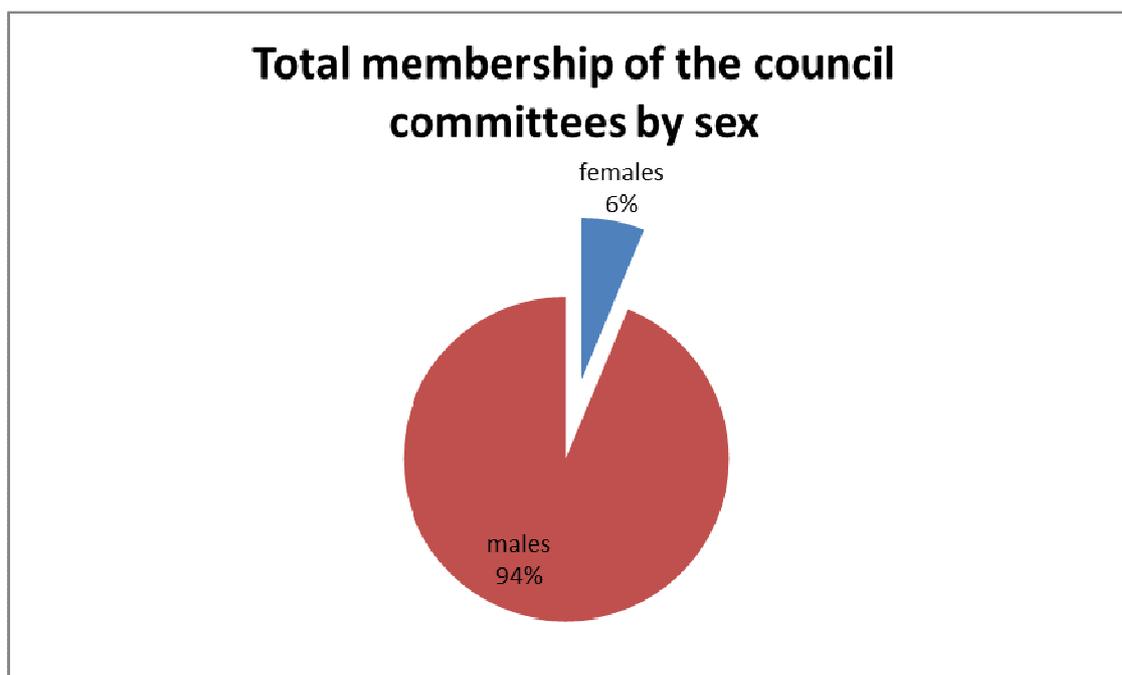


Fig 1: Total membership of the council committees by sex

(Source: Primary Data)

6.3 Socio-cultural factors influencing women’s political participation

The political participation and representation of women in Chivi Rural District Council is influenced by several socio-cultural factors which combine to condition the effectiveness of decentralisation as a women’s empowerment strategy. Chivi is an area that is set in a rural context where, like everywhere else in rural Zimbabwe, traditional culture still holds sway in terms of gender power relations. This means that the tradition of women’s subordination to men in terms of decision-making power is rooted in socio-cultural practices that date back centuries ago. It is these practices that still determine women’s political participation and representation today in Chivi.

In the studied three wards, women’s participation in formal politics is facilitated by legal and constitutional stipulations, which confer on them the right to run for political office and to choose their representatives through the ballot. “The Legal Age of Majority Act [of 1982] gave women the status of adults and a number of other pieces of legislation and policies have since been passed to improve the status of women to take up their rightful place as equal members of our society’ (Councillors’ Induction Handbook, 2013:52).

Women had hitherto been culturally regarded as minors who lived under the charge of a male figure, either a father or a husband. The said act, therefore, recognised the independence and freedom of women, at least at law. The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act (2013:38) asserts that “Every woman has full and equal dignity of the person with men and this includes equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.”

Taking a cue from the national constitution’s recognition of women as equal members of our society, political organisations, such as ZANU PF and MDC, have also enshrined in their party constitutions the inalienable right of women to full and equal dignity of the person with men. Article 17 of ZANU PF’s constitution, which provides for the setting up of the Women’s League, has, as one of the seven aims of the league, the duty “to defend, promote the rights of women and remove customs and attitudes that oppress and suppress women....” The party, in Article 7 of its constitution, goes further to set aside “at least one third of the total membership of the principal organs of the Party referred to in Sections 19(3), 19(8), 19(10),19(11) and 19(12)” for women. Almost similarly, the MDC, in Article 3 of its party constitution asserts its desire for “The equal representation of women in public office and within the party.”

However, notwithstanding such noble and egalitarian values shared by the nation and political organisations, women in Chivi still continue to be politically dominated by men. Many reasons explain this dominance. This study points at patriarchy as the biggest impediment against women’s political participation and representation. The following are responses from two different women:

- It is because our societies are patriarchal. They are ruled and dominated by men so women are denied access to positions of power.
- Our societies are patriarchal in nature and as women we find it more comfortable to be led by a man. Even in homes, the wife becomes the major decision maker only at the absence of the husband. So if there are men who can lead women find it comfortable to be led.

While the two women responses are similar in that they both see patriarchy as a stumbling block to women’s political participation and representation, they differ in that the second respondent goes further to express a sense of comfort with the system of male political domination over women.

There is an undertone of acceptance of a situation which women acknowledge to be unfair, but also which, because it is so ubiquitous and has been in existence for centuries, they have grown to find comfort in. One can, therefore, infer from these data that patriarchy puts women at a disadvantage which precludes them from full political participation and consequently gaining equal representation with men in decision-making positions, and that because of its widespread and deep-rooted quality, it has inculcated in women a sense of fatalism that makes them accept the status quo as normal.

It is patriarchy that has inculcated in men a sense of superiority to women, and in women a sense of inferiority to, and fear of, men. One respondent said, “Men are too greedy and they think that they are the only ones who have powers to control everything”.

Women fear a lot just because they are oppressed both at home and at work. Another participant said “Our norms as black people – we fear you, men. I don’t know why...it just happens with us women; we just feel that a woman cannot do this efficiently. So, we end up voting for a man”.

There are also matrimony and motherhood stumbles to women participation in politics and local governance. One nursing sister observed: “Most of the work of a woman is at home. A woman needs to care for the children as well as the husband. The house should be cleaned by a woman, cooking is done by a woman and also management of the house is done by a woman.” Another professional woman, an agricultural extension worker concurred: “It is difficult to get involved in active politics because I have a husband and children to look after.” Thus, contrary to the idea that education predisposes one to getting involved in politics, evidence gathered in Chivi suggests otherwise.

In fact, it is the uneducated who were keen on gaining access to political power. A possible explanation of this is that for the woman without tertiary education and, therefore, no chance to get gainful formal employment, politics is a livelihood strategy, whereas for the professional woman, political power holds no such promise. Indeed, one participant who is Transport Organiser for the Women’s League of ZANU PF confessed that, “ndinenge ndichida kuti dai ndawanavo chimwe chinhu.”(My wish would be that I get something [from participating in politics]. But for professional women, the next imperative after getting an education and gainful employment is a stable life as a wife and a mother. They view politics with apathy. This conclusion is supported by one professional respondent who said, “It is true that a woman’s place is in the home as long as men play their roles well.... We as women are forced by circumstances to play significant roles outside the home.”

Young women who are below the age of forty are hardly active in the political processes of their wards, with the MDC showing a bigger, albeit insignificant, number of such women taking part in political leadership. The major reason for, firstly, the almost non-existence of young women below the age of 40 in leadership positions and, by extension, active politics, is its lack of promise for a sustainable livelihood for these young women who still have a long way to go in terms of their life spans and in terms of earning a living.

Also suggested by the evidence from this study is that there is a very strong and exclusionary system of

political patronage. For one to make it in ward politics, one has to be under the patronage of a powerful, high ranking and, invariably, male party official. That automatically means that for female political aspirants, chances of getting a place in local party structures decline to non-existence mainly because being under such kind of patronage inevitably has negative moral implications. As one interviewee pointed out, “Mohi munonyengwa.”(People will say you are the patron’s mistress). The desire to preserve dignity makes women recoil from politics of patronage and thus scatter their chances of winning in electoral politics.

6.4 Enhancing women’s participation and representation in local government

The women who participated in this research project proposed several measures that they saw as a solution to women’s low levels of political participation and representation in local government. Education, gender sensitisation, policy enforcement, women quotas and encouraging women were all mentioned as measures that could contribute to enhancing women’s political participation and representation in local government.

7. Conclusions

This study concludes that:

- decentralisation has had an insignificant influence on engaging women in the political processes of local government politics;
- there is lack of political will and commitment to the cause of women’s political empowerment;
- any effort to empower women without acknowledging that their subordination is a result of patriarchy, and therefore, by extension, without addressing cultural issues is bound to fail;
- women’s political subordination and under-representation is not a political problem, but rather a socio-cultural one which requires, not half-hearted solutions prescribed by uncommitted male politicians, but a multi-pronged approach; and
- while the importance of such women empowerment measures as educating women, reserving political positions for them and enforcing existing policies while formulating new ones cannot be dismissed, these measures should be ancillary to the one that confronts patriarchy head-on: gender sensitisation.

8. Recommendations

- Institutions such as Government, local authorities and political parties must be committed to the policies that they formulate to politically empower women. They must prove that commitment by enforcing the policies, instituting monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that ensure the correct implementation of policies and assess the impact of those policies.
- Development organisations and government departments must make sure that decentralisation, especially with the aim of politically empowering women, is a logical process that begins with capacity development of women so that they can then creatively and meaningfully participate in the political processes of their communities.
- Women in grassroots politics often lack the economic resources to bankroll their political campaigns. It would, therefore, be in the interests of women empowerment for women’s organisations, such as Women in Politics Support Unit to provide the necessary resources for women political aspirants during campaign periods.
- Awareness campaigns should be embarked on to make women appreciate first, their value and capacity as decision makers and second, to appreciate the need to support fellow women who want political positions in political parties and in government. Women need to understand that they are the true king-makers as they constitute the majority of the population and, by necessary inference, of the electorate. So, women must take advantage of their numerical superiority to form a critical mass that will uplift its own kind in politics.
- Lastly, gender sensitisation programmes should be held frequently in order to address negative attitudes and beliefs that are steeped in traditional culture. Gender sensitisation engages both men and women and aims to change their attitudes, especially by disabusing themselves of gender stereotypes which see men as superior to women. When such misconceptions no longer exist in the collective human mind, then all other attempts to empower women will have a greater chance to succeed.

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